

Australia Continues MPA Push: Officials Announce Plan for World's Largest No-Take Zone

Continuing its designation of national MPAs at a scale unmatched by other nations, the Australian government's latest endeavor will establish the world's largest no-take zone for commercial fishing, according to national officials.

The Australian government intends to declare a massive marine park around Macquarie Island, southeast of Tasmania in the Southern Ocean, that would span 16 million hectares (160,000 km²), of which nearly a third would be a no-fishing area. Announced in late June of this year, the plan to create the marine park will add yet another site to the country's fast-growing system of major marine ecological regions protected by law. It follows closely on the heels of Australia's designation of other MPAs, including last year's establishment of the Great Australian Bight Marine Park and this year's Tasmanian Seamounts Marine Reserve.

The Macquarie Island plan is undergoing a 60-day comment period, ending in August; following this, the park is expected to receive its official declaration. The government's commitment to an accelerated program of MPA declarations has been driven by Australia's National Oceans Policy, launched last December. Among the law's sweeping goals for protecting the marine environment was a call for a network of marine protected areas to represent Australia's wide diversity of marine ecoregions.

Precautionary Principle

The Macquarie Island Marine Park will include waters stretching from three miles off the eastern coast of Macquarie Island to the outer edge of Australia's EEZ. The island -- 34 km by 5 km, and roughly equidistant from Tasmania to Antarctica -- is already listed as a World Heritage Area and a Tasmanian Nature Reserve. Featuring unusual geological formations and a relatively harsh environment, it offers a rare breeding ground in the Southern Ocean for pinnipeds and seabirds, which reside there in abundance (more than 100,000 seals and 3.5 million birds). Several resident species, including seals and penguins, are listed as endangered or otherwise vulnerable according to Australian law or IUCN criteria.

The island's surrounding waters' role as feeding grounds for these species was a factor in the government's decision to create the protected area, as well as to establish a 5.7 million hectare (57,000 km²) "Highly Protected Zone" within it, where all fishing and mining activities will be prohibited. This zone, which Australian officials claim is the largest of its kind in the world, will comprise the southeast corner of the park and extend 100 m below the ocean floor. The remainder of the park will serve as a "Species/Habitat Management Zone" in which mining will be prohibited but some commercial fishing will be allowed.

The restrictions will likely have little immediate impact on human activity in the region, as there is no mining activity occurring there presently and just one fishing vessel has ever been recorded fishing the waters (a trawler that has visited the island each summer since 1994). Tourism levels to the island are low as well, according to official reports. Nonetheless, the government cited a general lack of scientific understanding of wildlife feeding behaviors and the effects of fishing on these behaviors as reasons to take a precautionary stance toward humans' consumptive activities in the region. The park creation plan calls for analyses of the region's benthic ecology and options for sustainable fishing practices in the area.

Tasmanian Seamounts Also Protected

In May, Environment Minister Robert Hill announced the proclamation of Australia's first exclusively deep-sea MPA, the Tasmanian Seamounts Marine Reserve. Located 170 km south of Hobart in the Southern Ocean, the reserve will protect unique and vulnerable seamount flora and fauna within an area of 37,000 hectares (370 km²). The site includes 70 submerged and extinct volcanoes in water between 1000 and 2000 meters deep.

Similar to Macquarie Island's proposed Highly Protected Zone, the deepwater seamount area will be off-limits to fishing and mining. According to government officials, the seamounts have never been trawled. Fishing will continue in surface waters above the seamounts, however.

Last year, the Australian government announced the creation of the Great Australian Bight Marine Park, located off Australia's southern coast. The Bight is the world's second largest marine park (2.3 million hectares, or 23,000 km²), exceeded only by Australia's Great Barrier Reef, at 350,000 km². In comparison, the largest marine sanctuary in the United States of America is Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, which measures 12,400 km².

For more information:

Rod Bruem, Office of Sen. Robert Hill, Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600, Australia. Tel: +61 2 6277 7640; Fax: +61 2 6273 6101.

Peter Shaughnessy, CSIRO Wildlife and Ecology, GPO Box 1538, Hobart TAS 7001, Australia. Tel: +61 2 6242 1600; Fax: +61 2 6241 3343; E-mail: peter.shaughnessy@dwe.csiro.au.

Web Site on Australian MPAs

www.environment.gov.au/marine/frameset/publications/fs_publications_main.html

The above web site has links to Australia's Oceans Policy, the proposed Macquarie Island Marine Park, the Tasmanian Seamounts Marine Reserve, and the management plan for the Great Australian Bight Marine Park.

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